

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 548

THE NATION
8 May 1982

The Biggest Whistle-Blowing of Them All

Washington, April 28

Back in January, with too little public attention, somebody at the Pentagon blew the whistle on the Reagan defense budget. In terms of money, it was by far the biggest whistle-blowing ever. On January 8, a veteran of the Pentagon press corps, George C. Wilson, reported in *The Washington Post* the explosion of a fiscal bombshell at a closed meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff the day before.

Wilson wrote that Richard D. DeLauer, the head of weapons-research and procurement at the Defense Department, told the Joint Chiefs that the Reagan five-year arms program might end up costing as much as 50 percent more than the figures sent to Congress.

This would be no minor gap. The Reagan five-year projection for fiscal 1984 through 1988 called for expenditures of \$1.5 trillion in 1983 dollars. DeLauer advised tightening up on the program because that amount was insufficient. The "best guess," he said, was a shortfall of \$300 billion, but the gap could be as large as \$750 billion.

To make these dizzy figures conceivable, let us borrow one of Reagan's favorite rhetorical devices. If the Pentagon had started spending a million dollars a day on the day the Prince of Peace was born, it would by now have spent less than half of that five-year \$1.5 trillion projection. And that's still not enough?

All those White House mutterings you have been hearing about the dangerous disclosure of national security secrets go back to that leak. Everybody at that secret briefing was later subjected to a lie-detector test in a frantic self-investigation. The august Joint Chiefs—praise God!—were cleared. But the ax has fallen on a former career officer, John C. F. Tillson, now a civilian director of manpower management at the Pentagon. He is a West Pointer, twice decorated with a Silver Star in Vietnam. He denied the charges but faces dismissal.

The affair raises a wide range of public policy questions, some of them urgent. Tillson is accused of leaking not just to a reporter but to five persons on the staffs of Congressional committees. The press reports did not name the committees, but I had no trouble obtaining the names of the recipients of the leak: two are from the Senate Armed Services Committee, one from the House Armed Services Committee and one each from the Senate and House Budget Committees.

These are the very committees on whose "right to know" Congress depends for its power to control the military budget. The Pentagon doesn't dare claim a right to

"classify" such information. So Tillson is accused of passing "official information," not military secrets.

Military cost overruns are hardly a secret. They are notorious, and growing. Congress has been trying for years to keep them within bounds. In 1972 the General Accounting Office reported that Defense Department weapons prices were running 40 percent over cost estimates. Now even the hawkish and right-wing Heritage Foundation (in a just released study, "Cutting the High Cost of Weapons") says that cost overruns are averaging 100 percent.

So a Pentagon spokesman at a press conference yesterday, in discussing the Tillson case, chose his words with precision. He said the captain had leaked secrets, not to an enemy but to an "adversary." Congress is certainly an adversary. The Pentagon feels about "whistle-blowers" the way the Kremlin feels about Helsinki-watchers.

The problem transcends inflation. The Pentagon violates all the favorite shibboleths of the Reagan Administration. One is reliance on the free market. The military-industrial complex, though eager to defend free enterprise abroad, evades it at home. The Heritage Foundation reports that only 8 percent of military contracts are fully competitive, while 60 percent are negotiated on a "sole source" basis.

Wilson and the five Congressional aides have denied that they learned of the new overrun forecasts from Tillson. The truth is that the Pentagon and the armed forces are full of rebels against the mindless dimensions and profligacy of the Reagan arms program.

The discontent surfaced in an extraordinary editorial in the March 1 *Army Times*. It fears "a backlash" against needed military improvements because of unrealistic military objectives. These were reflected in Secretary Weinberger's call earlier this year for extant forces big enough for "world-wide war, including concurrent reinforcement of Europe, deployment to Southwest Asia and support of other potential areas of conflict."

The *Army Times* said that "with a realistic foreign policy, in which the armed forces would be assigned only to defend the clear national interests, there would be no need to gear up for war in every jungle, desert and mountain range on the surface of the earth."

All this has immediate relevance to the current budget negotiations between Reagan and Congress. If the report of the Joint Chiefs is correct, it portends budget deficits worse than hitherto forecast. Defense overruns could add an average of from \$60 billion to \$150 billion to future deficits. On that basis how can fiscal sobriety ever be restored and interest rates brought down?

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